

Lights, Camera, Action! Student-produced Videos in an English Language Program

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Introduction

When considering the use of videos in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, one might have the image of instructors using movies for listening / viewing activities, e.g., having students watch a scene from a film then having them answer a list of comprehension questions or even completing a cloze exercise of some sort. Instructors might also ask students to watch a short clip then have them describe either verbally to a partner (who did not view the clip) or in writing the sequence of events in a paragraph. Another activity might be to play the video then stopping the movie just *before* a significant point in the film, and then having the students guess what they think will happen in the next scene (assuming they have never seen the movie). The above are just a sample of activities for using videos in the EFL classroom as they are relatively easy to execute, convenient to integrate into a syllabus, and there is a wealth of Hollywood films that might draw out students' motivation to learn English. Moreover, students tend to enjoy an occasional film where they can sit back, relax and, of course, take notes on the movie (it is a classwork after all).

However, when we practitioners think about the use of videos for EFL instruction, it is not common to have movie-making activities as part of the language learning syllabus, i.e., we hardly hear of students producing a short movie for the purpose of exercising their English language skills. Perhaps the notion of EFL students as filmmakers / videographers might be out of the scope for many instructors for a number of reasons; a lack of awareness and interest in media production on the part of the instructor; the amount of preparation involved to carry out such a project; equipment issues; expectations and goals of the students; curricular issues, etc. Perhaps an even more core reason why students as filmmakers is not considered such a common EFL activity might be because of one simple

question: does such an activity (making movies using the target language) really help improve students' foreign language skills or even increase motivation to learn English?

When considering the average university student in 2009, the population coming from the *Generation Y* cohort (people born between 1978 and 2000), these students are the digital natives; these are the people for whom multimedia are part of their daily repertoire for communication and entertainment. In a survey of 7,705 Generation Y college students, Junco and Mastrodicasa (2007) found that 97% of students owned a computer, 94% owned a cell phone, and 56% owned an MP3 player. They also found that 76% of students used Instant Messaging (IMing), and 92% of those students reported to be engaged in multitasking while IMing. The typical university student was born in an era where digital communications *is* part of life, and educators from all academic fields must ask themselves: are we providing our students the opportunity to create and share ideas using the tools that they are surrounded with? With the advent of the Internet, mobile phone technology, advances and ease in video editing software, and the widespread availability of video recording devices, educators and curriculum planners need to rethink how classroom activities reflect the realities of information creation, management, and distribution in the 21st century.

The use of videos in EFL is not new. Instructors use movies all the time for a variety of purposes and tasks. On a more in-depth level use of video, researchers have been using video to record students' recitations, pronunciation, and other verbal output. These activities are unique in their own way and serve different functions. With the rising use of videos for personal, commercial, educational, and business use, English language program planners should consider how students can create original and genuine content for communication as part of their course activities. The idea of students behind the camera as producers, directors, and creators is a notion that will be central in this paper. Specifically, this paper will describe an extra-curricular / promotional event held at a Japanese university EFL setting whereby students produced short films in English.

Background

Jissen Women's University (JWU) is a private school located in Hino City, Japan. JWU has three faculties, as well as a Foreign Language Center (FLC). The

FLC provides most of the English language instruction to students from all the university departments, as well as the attached junior college. The FLC also offers language courses in French, German, Chinese, and Korean. Through the FLC's Integrated English course, first year students receive a total of three hours of English instruction per week for one semester (15 weeks per semester). Students enrolled in the Integrated English Course receive training in four-skills development, but the primary focus is on speaking and listening skills.

For the 2009 spring Integrated English course, the FLC decided to create a competition where students can display their English skills combined with their creativity and their technological know-how by creating a short (2~3 minutes) movie in English; student films were evaluated based on the students' use of English, as well as the technical quality of the movies. The top three winning groups were awarded prizes. This event was called the English Skit Competition (ESC).

What is the English Skit Competition?

Students form groups of 2~3 members and perform a skit in English and record their performance using a video recording device of their choice (video camera, digital camera, or mobile phone). Group work was an essential component in the ESC for technical reasons, as well as to promote a collaborative learning environment. Dornyer (2007) notes that students working as a cohesive group is an effective motivational strategy.

Video recorded skits must run between 2~3 minutes. Scripts can be taken from a variety of sources including dialogues from their English textbooks, famous films, or an originally produced script. Students are then encouraged (but not required) to edit their video to create a more "cinematic feel" by using video editing software and story boarding techniques. Participants submit their videos via USB memory sticks, CD-ROM, e-mail, etc. Students' videos are then evaluated by FLC instructors on a points system based on three factors: 1) the quality of the videos; 2) performance and creativity of the skits; 3) English fluency, pronunciation, naturalness. Each member of the the top three teams were awarded with an iPod (1st place: iPod Nano; 2nd place: iPod Shuffle; 3rd place: iPod Shuffle 2nd generation).

The ESC served three functions: 1) to provide extra-curricular EFL *edutainment*, an educational experience with a fun, entertaining quality exclusively for Jissen students enrolled in the FLC's Integrated English Course; 2) encourage students to

use digital tools for communicative purposes; 3) promote the activities of the FLC and the university as a whole. Moreover, the edutainment factor was simply meant to remind students that learning another language can be exciting. Because the ESC was still in a testing phase, participation was strictly on a voluntary basis and had no bearing on the students' final grades for their usual English courses.

Student Videos

For the 2009 Spring ESC, a total of eleven teams participated in the inaugural event. All of the students' skits were originally created scripts, and were recorded using a variety of devices (video cameras, digital cameras, mobile phone cameras, and built-in computer webcams). Most of the videos skits consisted of common conversational exchanges (summer vacation plans, ordering food in a restaurant, school life, etc.), while one team recreated a television news broadcast. Most of the group videos were one-clip videos (the entire conversation was captured in one shot with no editing involved), however, two teams made use of storyboarding and video editing techniques (the eventual 1st and 3rd place teams). Also, one team used voiceover techniques (creating clearer audio quality) and English subtitling using Apple's iMovie video editing software (1st place team).

Evaluation Process

Students submitted their video clips in a computer file format (.mov, .avi, .mpeg) as opposed to videotape. All the videos were then uploaded onto a dedicated website (<http://jissenflc.blip.tv/>) for the judges to view at their own time. Having the video clips on the Internet also gave an opportunity for the participants to view their classmates' work.

For the 2009 Spring ESC, there were five judges consisting of Jissen FLC instructors, as well as a native English-speaker outside of the university. The students' videos were evaluated on a five-point system focusing on three main factors: 1) acting / performance; 2) English fluency and pronunciation; 3) technical skills (camera work, audio and video quality). See Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Sample video evaluation criteria

1 = Poor 2 = Below Average 3 = Average 4 = Good 5 = Excellent

TEAM NUMBER	MEMBERS	ACTING /PERFORMANCE	ENGLISH FLUENCY / PRONUNCIATION	TECHNICAL WORK (AUDIO, VIDEO)	TOTAL SCORE
1	Ms. A Ms. B Ms. C	4	3	4	11

Scores from all five judges were collated, and the top three teams were determined. The results were as follows:

TEAM NUMBER	MEMBERS	ACTING /PERFORMANCE	ENGLISH FLUENCY / PRONUNCIATION	TECHNICAL WORK (AUDIO, VIDEO)	TOTAL SCORE
10	Inoue, Shimodate	23	23	25	71
11	Ishikawa, Obo, Tsukahara	21	19	19	59
6	Okubo, Yokouchi	18	18	20	56

Why iPods? The “Oohh” Factor

When the English Skit Competition was first announced in my classes, a majority of the students did not seem too eager about the event, i.e., the look on their faces seemed flat and indifferent. At the time, I had hypothesized why the students were not excited about the event: 1) students probably did not fully understand my English explanation of the competition; 2) they were too shy to show their true emotions; 3) perhaps the students had experience in junior high and high school of performing skits in English as part of a class assignment, and they did not want to participate in yet another “school” event; 4) the return on investment (ROI) of participating in such an event was not up to their expectations, i.e., the students did not see any value on what they would receive for making a video in English.

Initially, I did not inform the students of the competition prizes for the top three

teams, so perhaps they had thought that the prizes might include something usual and unexciting like a paper award or a book certificate (personal opinion). I waited on purpose to reveal the ESC awards. When I eventually provided more details of the prize list, specifically, that each member of the top three teams would receive an iPod, the students were surprised and excited. Some of the students double-checked what I had said while others said “What?! Is it really true?” This was the excitement that I had been waiting for. I had heard similar reports from other instructors when they announced the skit competition in their classes, so as the main organizer of the event, it was comforting to hear that I was not the only instructor to observe positive feedback.

Despite its popular use as a gadget for listening to music and other audio files, iPods can also be used to listen to and watch educational materials in podcast format. A podcast and video podcasts are similar to a radio or television programs respectively except that the episodes are not live broadcasts; podcasts are programs which can be downloaded from the Internet, stored in an iPod, and accessed by the listener / viewer at any time.

One future objective of Jissen’s FLC is to develop a range of digitally-based, online foreign language learning materials including a dedicated website and audio and video podcasts. These materials would be primarily for Jissen students, but, as with all podcasts, the materials would also be open to anyone on the Internet for promotional means. Podcasts (and iPods) can be used as part of program-wide materials for use in regular language courses or students can be encouraged to use the materials as self-study materials. In order to cultivate a shift towards a digitally-oriented language learning environment at JWU, it seems more befitting to offer students the necessary tools that reflect this way for language learning; hence, iPods were chosen for the first ESC prizes. Moreover, iPods as an award certainly has an appeal that might help promote JWU.

Promotional Purposes

Aside from the edutainment value of the ESC, this event also served to promote the activities of the FLC. Speech contests and essay writing contests have traditionally been used by schools to display the English language skills of their students, but these events seem limited in how they can be used to promote the activities of an educational institution. Once a speech or essay writing contest

competition is over, others from outside of the university, particularly prospective students, are not really able to experience the students' work unless they are documented and made accessible for the public, e.g., posted on the Internet or printed in a newsletter of some sort. With the ESC, the promotional strategy was to utilize the Internet using video in particular to reach a wide audience in Japan; particularly, prospective high school students and their parents. As part of the rules for participating in the ESC, students understood that videos of the top three teams will eventually be posted on the FLC website (<http://www.jissengaigo.tv/>) for others to view at any time.

Students' Responses

At the conclusion of the 2009 Spring ESC, I had the opportunity to speak with several of the participants to hear their thoughts about the event. According to one student, using English through video production is suitable for Japanese students because "Japanese students are shy." By performing the skit in private, away from an immediate audience, she felt that she was able to perform the skit with little pressure. Shooting the English skits on their own time also provided students more time to practice and fine-tune any difficulties in English pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, etc. Perhaps language instructors should consider this point when having students perform skits, plays and other live performances as part of a course activity. Of course, there are students that thrive on performing in front of an audience, so there needs to be some consideration of students' confidence and anxiety of performing in their second language.

Another student said that before participating in the ESC, she was not too enthusiastic about learning English in general (she was strongly recommended to participate in the ESC because of her classmate's advice). When she was informed that the top three videos would be uploaded onto the Jissen FLC website, she got excited and made an extra effort to perform well. The fact that people from all over the world could potentially view her video, this motivated her to practice even harder. She now has a more positive attitude towards learning English. Hazard (2006) conducted a similar event whereby Korean EFL students made a four-minute movie using digital cameras and cell phones and reported similar responses. One student in this group also mentioned studying even harder for the sake of making a good film.

Overall, most of the students mentioned that the ESC is a unique event; all of the participating students have never had the opportunity to use English specifically for a movie production.

Conclusion

EFL students creating videos using the target language is not the end-all means in foreign language instruction. The ESC is no exception. Nonetheless, everyone has something to say, and language instructors should explore and provide a variety of platforms for students to express their ideas. Making a movie is just one way. The ESC is not suited for all language instructors or all language programs; nor is it applicable for all learners – just like any other language learning method / activity / textbook. Moreover, it is not the intent of this paper to propose that digital tools will and should replace traditional means of language instruction. The sole purpose of this paper was merely to demonstrate how video-based activities can be used in an EFL program, and how it can be used to motivate students to use English in a meaningful and creative way. In addition, students will have experienced the workflow of media production, and hopefully catch a glimpse of how the process of creating video content for the web fits in the larger scheme of Internet-based communication strategies. Video recording devices (whether on mobile phones, digital cameras, webcams, or full-fledge video cameras) are the new tools in the 21st century pencil case, and educators should consider how these new tools will transform pedagogy.

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